“But irony seems to me to dominate life”: The Romantic Longing for Absolute Love in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*

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Abstract: *Madame Bovary* is often celebrated as a typical Realist novel in that Flaubert, as a narrator, exposes the follies of Romanticism by detachedly, if not mercilessly, characterising Emma as a woman whose life is dominated by her harmful desire to materialise her idea(l) of love that she encounters in Romantic literature. Upon closer examination, however, we will see that Flaubert, as a person, seems to show strong compassion for Emma’s Romantic longing as an irony of life: “If *Bovary* is worth anything,” says Flaubert, “the book will not lack heart. Irony, though, seems to me to dominate life.” To further Flaubert’s insights into the irony of life, I draw on the Kantian sublime and Lacanian *jouissance* to explicate the nature of Romantic longing—the ironic discrepancy between infinite desire and finite satisfaction—and illustrate the ways in which such longing manifests itself in Emma and, surprisingly and ironically, in Charles, arguably the most down-to-earth and content character in the novel.

Keywords: Romantic longing, irony, *jouissance*, sublime, *passage à l’acte*

> This woman [Emma], in reality, is very sublime in her kind, in her narrow world, besieged by restricted horizons. — Charles Baudelaire, *Madame Bovary* (654)

Madame Bovary: Provincial Manners (1856) is often hailed as a Realist novel *par excellence* insofar as Flaubert exposed Romantic follies by detachedly portraying Emma as a woman who continuously endeavours to materialise in social reality the kind of romantic love she finds in Romantic literature and ends up committing suicide out of *weltschmerz*. Admittedly, as a narrator, Flaubert shows little mercy towards Emma, making her suicide a corollary of her follies. As a person, though, he seems in great sympathy with her struggle for an unattainable ideal. For one thing, Flaubert is said to have answered a question concerning the source of the character Emma by repeating, “Mme Bovary, *c’est moi*!—*D’après moi*” (I think, Mme Bovary is me!) (Descharmes 103n). His identification with Emma particularly makes sense in terms of the insatiability from which they both suffer: “In his correspondence and travel diaries, Gustave shows that [like Emma] he was never able to enjoy the present—satisfaction always lay in the future, in things yet unat-tained” (Speziale-Bagliacca 66). For another, in a letter to his mistress Louise Colet, dated 9 May 1852, Flaubert states wistfully that “I’ve got compassion for lots of things where sensitive people did not. If *Bovary* is worth anything, the book will not lack heart. Irony, though, seems to me to dominate life” (Flaubert 1926, 407).

Indeed, Flaubert strewed irony—particularly, that which Claire Colebrook describes as “cosmic irony, or the irony of fate” (13)[1]—throughout the novel. The story begins when Charles is a shy, clumsy school boy bullied by his new classmates after his father has tried to bring him up in a Spartan manner, and closes when Charles as a middle-aged conscientious doctor in Yonville dies alone from a broken heart while Monsieur Homais, a self-serving charlatan who has sabotaged Charles and

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other doctors in the town, is awarded the Legion of Honour. In particular, it is in love that we encounter the greatest irony of life that Flaubert weaved into the novel. As Giles Mitchell points out, "Flaubert regarded love as an '*inassouvissable*' problem because while desire may be enormous, the sustenance provided by the world is 'paltry'" (124–25). In a similar vein, Per Bjørnar Grande suggests that Flaubert "creates a world where everything is strictly realistic" (76) while those who pursue ideal love "taste the bitterness of desire most intensely" (93). For Harold Bloom, Emma represents "something stubborn in all of us" (2) when yearning to erase the (ironic) discrepancy between infinite desire and finite satisfaction, an unfillable void that lies at the very core of Romantic longing (*Sehnsucht*). It is for this Sisyphean struggle that Giles Mitchell considers Emma "a universal figure" (125) in the conclusion of his seminal article on Emma as a pathological narcissist. In this article, I would like to draw on the Kantian sublime and Lacanian *jouissance* to illuminate the nature of Romantic longing and elucidate the ways in which Flaubert in the novel makes such longing visible in Emma, most visionary of all, and Charles, most earthbound of all, to evince that the pain of irony indeed dominates life.

I

Let me begin by defining Romantic longing with the ending lines of a love poem, entitled "To—," that P. B. Shelley wrote in 1822 probably for Jane Williams, a woman with whom he was infatuated with near the end of his life:

> I can give not what men call love,
> But wilt thou accept not
> The worship the heart lifts above
> And the Heavens reject not,—
> The desire of the moth for the star,
> Of the night for the morrow,
> The devotion to something afar
> From the sphere of our sorrow? (639, Stanza 2)

By the last four lines, Shelley articulated a fundamental rupture at the core of our being between the moth and the star, the finite and the infinite, a rupture that could lead to an (eternal) longing for a joy unsullied by the mundanity of life, by "the sphere of our sorrow." The "desire of the moth for the star" can be found in most of us at different stages of life, manifesting itself, particularly, in our dissatisfaction with material reality. The desire is inevitable yet potentially harmful or even lethal when, like a moth drawn to a flame, we are driven to go beyond the limits of material reality with an everlasting hope for something more, something beyond the boundaries of human surroundings, thus becoming painfully and perpetually discontent with the real circumstance amidst which *human* love must permanently reside.

Shelley's poem, as it were, serves to illustrate the Romantic longing (*Sehnsucht*) for the harmony of physical and spiritual faculties that, according to A. W. Schlegel, is given by nature to the ancient Greeks and yet becomes unattainable with the advent of Christianity, a religion that makes us distinctly aware "that no external object can ever entirely fill our souls; and that all earthly enjoyment is but a fleeting and momentary illusion" (26).[2] As such, while Greek art (including literature) is an art of enjoyment of the present, modern, or Romantic, art is that "of desire," hovering "betwixt recollection and hope" (27). Romantic longing betokens the pain of the inherently divided subject who can never be fully satisfied and therefore desires something more that nevertheless always recedes in such a way as to leave one with an aching sense of lack. Romantic longing, one can say, explains why "[i]rony for the Romantics was the only true mode of life" (Colebrook, 51).

In Kantian terms, Romantic longing is the pain of the sublime, arising from the impossibility of suturing the fissure between the human and the inhuman, phenomena and noumena, the sensible

faculty of imagination and the supersensible faculty of reason. For example, we can conceive of the absolutely great, but it always appears to be painfully inadequate to present an object in the empirical world to match the Idea of absolute greatness because compared with absolute greatness, everything else is small (Kant §23, 98; §26, 111; §27, 115). Meanwhile, such inadequacy opens up noumena to human desire when presenting it as a category within the bounds of the sensuous-phenomenal world. As Deleuze writes of the Kantian sublime, "the abyss between the sensible world [phenomena] and the suprasensible world [noumena] exists only in order to be filled" (39) and "[i]n many ways [the faculties of] understanding and reason are deeply tormented by the ambition to make things in themselves known to us" (24). Considered in this light, the sublime points to the pain of pursuing a transcendent surplus, a surplus that always evades the grasp of human sensory, finite experience.

Psychoanalytically speaking, the sublime points to the pain of filling an immanent lack, a lack that acts as a black hole around which human desire is structured. Taking a cue from Kant, Lacan links the Kantian Thing-in-itself to the Freudian Thing. Although deprived of any real substance and inaccessible to symbolic reality, the Thing is the guiding pole of our longing for fulfilment beyond the satisfaction of physical needs. Indeed, the Thing is "the *cause* of the most fundamental human passion" (1992, 97) in that it functions to seduce the subject to the phantasmatic *jouissance* of future wholeness, fulfilment, and well-being (Fink 60). Since the Thing is not accessible to symbolic reality, of which the subject is part, one cannot access *jouissance* without the pain of desubjectification, without the *passage à l'acte* (Lacan 2014, 115). In Lacan, the pleasure principle is the law that keeps the subject more or less distant from the Thing, making the subject circle around it, cling to it in fantasy, without ever attaining it (•i•ek 96). Consequently, as subjects, we could be plagued by anxiety that our pleasure is never quite enough, by the desire to go "beyond the pleasure principle" of symbolic reality to reach the absolute pleasure of the Thing.

According to the psychiatrist Lewis Kirshner, in order for romantic love to proceed in symbolic reality, the subject has to succumb to the limits of the pleasure principle by respecting the boundary between reality and fantasy, pleasure and absolute pleasure, the I and the Not-I:

> [W]hile the attraction of a beloved may be taken as real by the lover, as if that person alone can fulfil the lover's desire, there is a symbolic boundary of permissible objects and behaviors, defined by rules, customs, narrative models, and the like, that may not be crossed. Central to these limits is the recognition of the otherness of the object, the beloved person's absolute separateness. (87)

That is, the lover must accept that an unbridgeable inter-subjective gap exists between him/her and his/her beloved—however madly in love they are with each other. Nevertheless, endowed with "all the virile qualities" (Baudelaire, "*Madame Bovary*," 653), Emma refuses to acknowledge the insurmountable gap and insists on the realisation of a total union, absolute pleasure which is impossible to fulfil within the bounds of symbolic reality. It is for this reason that Baudelaire regards Emma as a very sublime example of her kind (654). Emma, to quote Hulme in a different context, "is always flying, flying over abysses, flying up into the eternal gases" (62-63).

Her indomitable will, as we shall see, illustrates that of a Byronic figure "who cannot put up with the existing world . . . because he has ideals which presuppose the necessity for perpetual fervent movement forward, movement which is constantly confined by the stupidity and the unimaginativeness and the flatness of the existing world" (Berlin 154). Isaiah Berlin describes this discontent as "the Byronic syndrome," one that lies at the heart of the European Romanticism (154-55).

II

Critics often ascribe Emma's Romantic longing for absolute pleasure, *jouissance*, to her early life in the convent, succeeded by dreamy visions of happiness derived from the sentimental Romantic novels she reads. Grande, for instance, maintains that one cannot sufficiently understand Emma's unhappiness without examining her early education in the convent and later role models in Roman-

tic novels (79). The two encounters indeed sow the seeds of her longing. It is, however, during her visit to La Vaubyessard that she first encounters the materialisation of dreamy happiness and thereby kindles her resolution to fulfil the lack at the core of her marriage. As "an inward detachment" (Flaubert 2004, 38) of Emma from Charles looms large, they are invited to the party in the chateau at La Vaubyessard of the Marquis d'Andervilliers, a former patient of Charles. There the pompous building, exotic food, the waltz, and stylish and flirtatious ladies and gentlemen all combine, as Lacan would say, to create an ideal mirror image that Emma desires to "be part of" (Flaubert 2004, 49) and (mis)recognises as the embodiment of "bliss, passion, and ecstasy, words that she had found so beautiful in books" (32).

In a scenario that recalls Lacan's notion of "the mirror stage," Emma for the first time experiences a "drama" in which a "primordial Discord" (Lacan 1977, 4) occurs between the "perfect," splendid life in La Vaubyessard and her imperfect, lacklustre life in the farm where she grew up. When looking at the broken window panes against which peasants in the garden press their faces,

> [s]uddenly she thought of Les Bertaux. She saw the farm, the muddy pond, her father in his smock under the apple trees, and she saw herself in earlier days, skimming cream with her finger from the earthenware milk pans in the dairy. But, in the dazzling splendours of the present moment, her past life, always until then so vivid, was vanishing completely, and she almost doubted that she had ever lived it. (Flaubert 2004, 47)

Outside the window panes is Emma's past life, and inside is the fantasy life that she misidentifies as the real life: rather, she (mis)recognises the party as the very incarnation of her desire for a love life full of starry splendour beyond the exigencies of social reality. From this point onwards, Emma has a definite goal to mend the broken window to stop her past life intruding on her dreamy happiness for fear of sliding back again into the dull emptiness where she started.

Flaubert concludes Chapter Eight of Part I by saying that "her [Emma's] visit to La Vaubyessard had left a chasm [*un trou*] in her life, like those great crevasses that a storm sometimes hollows out in the mountains, in a single night" (2004, 51; 1972, 90). This gracefully written sentence very well encapsulates the story. For one thing, the simile foreshadows the violent, irresistible impact that the ideal image of the party produces on Emma: as the story unfolds, the impact turns out to be destructive like a storm and culminates in her suicide, a violent *passage à l'acte*, towards the end of the novel. For another, the violent *passage* cannot be separated from the phrase "a chasm in her life," a metaphor which would serve better as the subtitle of the novel than *Mœurs de province* (Provincial Manners): Emma persistently desires to fill out—but to no avail—the hole (*trou*) at the core of her being in order to obtain complete satisfaction, absolute pleasure.

Emma's obsession with *jouissance* takes the form of absolute love, love that, as Kirshner has put it, effaces the gap between one's private feelings and the reality of the other. In her *liaison* either with Rodolphe or with Léon, Emma longs to erase the gap, to reach the absolute pleasure of the Thing: she ignores the other's absolute separateness, and creates a fantasy to drag the other into her impossible ideal world to possess him completely. For instance, in motivating Rodolphe to elope with her, Emma states,

> What harm could possibly befall me? There isn't a desert or a precipice or an ocean that I wouldn't cross with you. When we're living together, every passing day will be like an embrace uniting us more closely, more completely! There'll be nothing to disturb us, no cares, no obstacles. We'll be alone, just you and me, forever! (177).

Emma builds a *vita nuova* on an ideal world so paradisiacal as to move even a womaniser like Rodolphe. Reason, though, soon seizes him inasmuch as he knows very well that the blissful union Emma pictures will not be based on mutual possession but on her absolute possession of him, on her annihilation of his subjectivity. It comes as no surprise, then, that Rodolphe decides to run away from Emma. His departure, though, may not strike readers too much as an irony of life since he is never serious about love, as Flaubert subtly satirises Rodolphe's false display of love by introducing the

presentation of agricultural prizes to crisscross, or indeed gloss, his seduction speech. For instance, the gold medal in *Manures* is awarded while Rodolphe speaks pretentiously to Emma "Time and again I've intended to leave, yet I've followed you, I've remained by your side" (132).

Léon's case, however, is different from Rodolphe's. Léon embodies the idea of the young Romantic—sensitive, sentimental, and imaginative—and therefore seems an excellent match for Emma. They fall for each other when they first meet—an instant *rapport* that is not the case with her liaison with Roldolphe. Consequently, when Léon can no longer endure his secret love for Emma and thus decides to leave Yonville for Paris, the stormy feeling of having a hole in her heart returns to plunge Emma into the depth of despair. Three years later, when they meet again, they do not wait but soon fall in love madly with each other. For Léon, Emma epitomises the beauty of literature: "She was the beloved of every novel, the heroine of every drama, the vague *she* of every volume of poetry . . . , she was, above all else, an Angel" (235). But to be with angels, one has to live in a noumenal world, in a world beyond the bounds of social reality. Léon, of course, cannot (afford to) do so. Gradually, he is frightened by Emma's immoderate propensity to disregard symbolic reality and, above all, his subjectivity:

> [T]here seemed to Léon to be something excessive, shadowy, and ominous, something that kept slipping between them, subtly, to separate them. . . . What had charmed him at first now rather frightened him. Besides, he rebelled against the way, with each passing week, his personality was becoming increasingly dominated by hers. He resented Emma for this ongoing victory. He even struggled to stop himself loving her, ... (251)

Eventually, Léon decides to cease his struggle by giving up Emma to build a better career, or indeed, to maintain his subjectivity. Much as he would like to jump or fly, Léon does not forget he is mixed up with earth and therefore has to return back. Compared to Rodolphe's retreat, Léon's would really push the reader to reflect deploringly on the triumphant reign of the reality principle and, accordingly, on the irony of the inter-subjective gap in love.

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator says, "she [Emma] wasn't happy, she'd never been happy! Why did life fall so far short of her expectations, why did whatever she depended on turn instantly to dust beneath her hand?" (252) Here it seems as if Flaubert spoke through the narrator that "Irony . . . seems to me to dominate life." In her obstinate pursuit of complete satisfaction, Emma is doomed to be unhappy since she refuses to succumb to the ironic fact that, as Lacan would say, there is always a hole in one's life that can never be filled up within the bounds of social reality. As such, throughout the novel, she constantly has the sense that there is something more she could have had, something she has missed out on. Emma, Baudelaire would say, "would always be content where [she is] not and never stop discussing the question of relocation with [her] soul" ("Anywhere Out of the World," 303).

In Flaubert, as in Lacan, the tension between the limits of satisfaction and the longing for the infinite is a permanent, albeit ironic, feature of life. Indeed, instead of being "the only character in *Madame Bovary* who is content with life" as Grande describes it (84), Charles, albeit down-to-earth, feels the aching sense of lack and therefore longs for "greater freedom" (Flaubert 2004, 13) in his first marriage. More significantly, after Emma dies, Charles turns into an Emma-like person who desperately tries to sustain his Romantic posture as a testimony of Emma's continuing presence:

> [H]e conceived for her an unremitting, raging desire that fed despair, and was unbounded, because it could never be satisfied now. To please her, as if she were still alive, he adopted her preferences and her ideas; he bought himself patent-leather boots and began wearing white cravats. He waxed his moustaches, and, like her, signed his name to promissory notes. (305)

Ironically, if Emma were still alive, she would have fallen for this "Romantic" Charles—whom she used to despise as "a pitiful creature" (56) when alive. But, alas, "Fate is to blame'" (311), as Charles utters despairingly at the novel's end. Eventually, "overwhelmed by the nebulous wafts of love that

swell[s] his sorrowing heart" (311), Charles dies of bereavement while holding in his hand a lock of Emma's long black hair; he wipes out his subjectivity to gratify his longing for a total union with Emma in the grave—the *passage à l'acte*—and thereby achieves *jouissance*.

Compared to Emma's dramatic suicide, a violent *passage à l'acte*, in a crowded bedroom, Charles's lonely death in a garden is demurely placid but no less ironically poignant. Through the most Romantic character Emma's liaisons and, to a lesser degree, the most Realist character Charles's marriages, Flaubert shows that the pain of (cosmic) irony indeed prevails in life. "[W]herever one does not restrict oneself," as Friedrich Schlegel writes of Romantic irony, "one is restricted by the world" (147).

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Notes

[1] Colebrook defines cosmic irony as follows: "Where the expectations of a character or community are thwarted by life's events, events which often seem to pass judgement on life or that seem to be the outcome of fate" (175).

[2] Schlegel predicated his idea of Romantic longing on the distinction Friedrich Schiller established between "naïve" and "sentimental" poetry according to the harmony with nature. The former belongs to a people or poet whose consciousness *dwells* in nature so *naturally* that sense and reason have not been divided. By contrast, the latter belongs to a people or poet whose social life has been culturally mediated so much as to leave nature behind; as such, the harmonious cooperation of sense and reason becomes merely "an idea" from which the actual world is infinitely separated (201).

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